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ABSTRACT

Research on loneliness and research on social support offer complementary perspectives on how social relationships affect health and well being. However, despite considerable overlap, loneliness and lack of social support reflect deficits of different kinds of social exchanges and these deficits have distinct consequences for well being. Social support research emphasizes the importance of various kinds of help provided by others in ameliorating the effects of stressful events, while loneliness research emphasizes the importance of opportunities for pleasurable companionship and intimacy in enhancing psychological well being. Help provided by others is most useful in reducing threats to well being, while companionship is most useful in providing positive inputs to well being. Individuals who are lonely and those who lack social support are likely to differ not only in the kinds of concrete interpersonal experiences they lack but also in how they interpret their situation. The public meaning of loneliness also differs from that of low social support. Cultural stereotypes portray lonely people as failures in the social marketplace, while people who do not seek help are often seen as heroic or highly competent. These conceptual differences, however, do not necessarily reflect empirical differences. Research suggests that measures of loneliness and measures of social support are strongly correlated. In order to identify the extent to which loneliness and lack of social support represent distinct conditions, theoretically guided analyses of the actual interpersonal experiences that evoke feelings of loneliness and feelings of being unsupported should be conducted. (BL)

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LONELINESS AND LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT: SAME OR DIFFERENT PHENOMENA?

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Loneliness and Lack of Social Support: Same or Different Phenomena?

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Research on loneliness and research on social support offer complementary perspectives on how social relationships affect health and well-being. Efforts to bridge these two lines of work should therefore increase our understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of deficient social ties (Rook, 1984a, 1984b). A fundamental question that arises in comparing work from these two traditions is whether loneliness and lack of social support are the same or different phenomena. I will argue today that, despite considerable overlap, loneliness and lack of social support differ in several important respects. I will concentrate on three general differences. First, I will argue that loneliness and lack of social support reflect deficits of different kinds of social exchanges (or social provisions) and that these deficits have distinct consequences for well-being. Second, I will suggest that identifying oneself as lonely is likely to have different implications for self-esteem than identifying oneself as lacking social support. Third, I will suggest that loneliness and lack of social support differ in their public meaning as well as their private meaning. In developing my arguments, I will draw primarily upon the theoretical formulations of loneliness and social support researchers rather than a body of empirical work since, as Ben Gottlieb noted at the outset, empirical studies comparing loneliness and social support are scarce. If time permits, I would like to comment briefly on the kind of empirical work needed to help us define the extent of overlap between loneliness and social support.

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I would like to begin by illustrating how the different historical origins of research on social support and research on loneliness have led those working within each tradition to emphasize different kinds of social provisions and their consequences. By social provisions I mean the tangible and intangible commodities that people exchange in social interaction (cf., Weiss, 1973). Much of the current interest in social support stems from efforts to identify factors that reduce the adverse efects of life stress and and from research documenting the effectiveness of nonprofessional helpers (Gottlieb, 1983). Given these historical roots, the unifying theme in most social support research is the idea that significant helping resources exist naturally in people's social networks. Indeed, the term support itself connotes a central concern with the provision of help. Those who fail to receive help with pressing problems are assumed to be at increased risk of developing stress-related disorders.

Research on loneliness, in contrast, arose not out of an interest in who is most vulnerable to stress but, rather, from observations of the intense distress that people experience when social bonds are lost or never attained. Studies of the adjustment difficulties experienced by children who lack strong attachments to their parents (e.g., Bowlby, 1960; Ainsworth, 1964) and of the painful emotions that follow bereavement and marital dissolution (Parkes, 1972; Weiss, 1975) stimulated an interest in loneliness. Theorists inferred from such research that close interpersonal bonds afford intrinsic satisfactions that most people desire. People whose efforts to form social bonds are thwarted, accordingly, experience loneliness and other forms of emotional distress. Loneliness researchers, like social support researchers, recognize that social relationships contribute to well-being by providing security and help in times of trouble (e.g., Bowlby, 1977), but they also emphasize that relationships provide opportunities for companionship and

intimacy, such as shared leisure, discussion of common interests, and expressions of affection. Unlike interactions oriented toward problem-solving, these companionate and intimate activities are engaged in for their own sake. While such pleasurable social activities may at times serve to provide distraction from stressful problems (e.g., Cohen & McKay, 1984), their more common function is to enhance mood and feelings of self-worth directly.

To summarize what I have said so far, social support researchers emphasize the importance of various kinds of help provided by others in ameliorating the effects of stressful events. Loneliness researchers, in contrast, emphasize the importance of opportunities for pleasurable companionship and intimacy in enhancing psychological well-being. From this perspective, having others to turn to for various types of help may not prevent feelings of loneliness among those who lack partners for desired social activities. Similarly, having companions for desired social activities is no guarantee that one will have adequate support for personal problems when they arise. This analysis suggests, moreover, that lacking help from others has different consequences for psychological well-being than lacking opportunities for companionship and intimacy with others. Help provided by others is likely to be most useful in reducing threats to well-being by facilitating adaptation to stressful events. That is, help is most important when the individual's equilibrium has been disrupted by some event or set of events. Without such help, the individual is vulnerable to stress-related emotional and physical disorders. Companionship and intimate interaction, in contrast, are most useful in providing positive inputs to well-being, such as recreation and affection. That is, companionship and intimacy are important not so much for restoring the individual to a prior level of functioning as for elevating the current level of contentment. In the absence of

opportunities for companionship and intimacy, the indivdidual experiences loneliness and is vulnerable to depression, boredom and low self-esteem (Brennan & Auslander, 1979; Perlman & Peplau, in press; Rook, in press; Weiss, 1973). From this perspective, then, somewhat different social deficits underlie loneliness and lack of social support, and these different deficits create vulnerabilities to distinct emotional

To shift to another level of analysis, those who are lonely and those who lack social support are likely to differ not only in the kinds of concrete interpersonal experiences they lack but also in how they interpret their situation. Considerable evidence suggests that lonely people blame themselves for their condition (e.g., Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982), and, as a result, suffer lowered feelings of self-worth (Cutrona, 1982; Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981). The persistence of loneliness over a long period encourages people to believe that they have major personal inadequacies (Peplau & Caldwell, 1978; Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979). Given such an internal attribution for the failure to establish satisfying social ties, they may curtail efforts to meet others, ensuring continued loneliness. A self-perpetuating cycle of defeat is thus established, which greatly increases susceptibility to depression.

Studies have not yet investigated attributions for low support, but it is doubtful that the tendency toward self-blame is as great (Rook, 1934b). It seems as likely that those who lack support would attribute the problem to the selfishness of members of their social networks as to inadequacies of their own. In addition, it may be easier to " exaplain away" the lack of help forthcoming from one's network than it is to "explain away" the lack of opportunities for companionship and intimacy. For example, if the individual does not disclose personal problems and/or does not explicitly request help, then the failure of others to offer support can be attributed to ignorance

rather than disinterest, thus protecting the individual from feeling unsupported. Friends who are slow to provide help after a problem has been disclosed can be excused as not knowing how to be helpful or as respecting the individual's own coping skills and independence. The need for companionship, however, is likely to be regarded as more constant (or stable) than the need for problem-related support and should not require explicit self-disclosure to be known. In fact, those who lack companions for social activities may find it difficult to avoid revealing their circumstances because of the many public contexts in which the presence or absence of a partner is salient, such as parties, movies and restaurants. As a result, when members of one's social network do not extend social invitations, it is difficult to attribute this to their ignorance or awkwardness. Instead, a compelling explanation is that others simply do not enjoy one's company, perhaps because of some personal deficiency. Thus, loneliness and lack of social support are apt to differ in their private meaning, with loneliness being more likely to evoke attributions of self-blame and feelings of inadequacy.

The public meaning of loneliness also appears to differ from that of low social support. Cultural stereotypes portray lonely people as failures in the social marketplace (Gordon, 1976; Parmelee & Werner, 1978). Thus, to be lonely is a stigmatized condition. The public view of those who lack social support is much more ambiguous. While researchers view support as desirable for healthy functioning, cultural values regarding self-reliance may actually serve to cast those who do not turn to others for help as heroic or highly competent. Thus, lack of social support seems unlikely to have the negative cultural implications that loneliness does and might even have positive implications among some people.

In sum, I have argued that loneliness and lack of social support are not

identical phenomena. At a conceptual level, they appear to differ in the kind of social deficits involved, in the private interpretations they evoke and in their public meaning. In order to make these contrast most apparent, I have intentionally defined social support in narrow terms as the provision of problem-oriented help. While I believe that this definition is consistent with the historical emphasis of the field, I recognize that others may prefer a broader view of social support; for example, one that includes shared leisure and other companionate activities as types of support (e.g., Barrera & Ainlay, 1983). My goal is not to argue for a particular definition of either social support or loneliness but, rather, to caution against assuming that these conditions are identical and to illustrate the kinds of hypotheses that can be deerived from even a very simple comparative analysis.

This brings me to my last point. To suggest that these conditions differ conceptually does not mean that they will be unrelated empirically. It is quite plausible that those who lack others to turn to for help will also lack others to turn to for companionship and intimacy. In fact, preliminary research suggests that measures of lonelines and measures of social support are strongly correlated (Sarason, Sarason, Hacker, & Basham, 1983). Yet it is also important to recognize that such high correlations do not necessarily mean that loneliness and lack of social support are the same entities, just as the high correlations routinely observed between income and education do not mean that income and education are synonymous. In order to identify the extent to which loneliness and lack of social support represent distinct conditions, we need theoretically-guided analyses of the actual interpersonal experiences that evoke feelings of loneliness and feelings of being unsupported. Only by undertaking analyses that penetrate to the level of specific behavioral episodes (Gottlieb, 1984), can we establish whether similar or dissimilar experiences underlie reports of loneliness and lack of

support. Such analyses are also likely to shed light on the important question of whether different kinds of interventions will be required to alleviate loneliness and to increase access to social support.

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